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200539Z May 05

UNCLAS HARARE 000710

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Food Security Update

REF: Harare 425

Summary

1. (SBU) Food insecurity will likely be widespread in Zimbabwe this year. Concerns about the maize (corn) harvest (reftel), the country's staple crop, have been borne out and a large deficit is being forecast. The problem could be exacerbated by Zimbabwe's lack of foreign exchange, which could complicate efforts to import food. We recommend prudent USG planning to be able to respond quickly in the event of a crisis and an approach now to the GOZ to approve donor feeding of most vulnerable groups. End Summary.

Poor Maize Harvest; Uncertain Outlook

2. (SBU) Given the poor maize harvest this year, all observers, including the mission's food monitors, the UN, other donors, and privately some Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) officials, expect a deficit of approximately one million metric tons (MTs), against a need of 1.5 to 1.8 MTs. This will represent a larger deficit than was the case in 2002, the last serious food crisis, when donors provided over 300,000 MTs of grain.

3. (SBU) It is as yet unclear whether this deficit will translate into wide-spread hunger. Although the estimates of the harvest are low - 400,000 to 600,000 MTs, we do not yet know the actual number, nor whether farmers are withholding part of the harvest from the GOZ's monopoly Grain Marketing Board, as claimed by the GOZ. In addition, we do not know how much grain is currently in GOZ stocks, and the GOZ is very unlikely to share accurate data. Finally, historically donors have consistently underestimated the GOZ's capacity to import food and have underestimated the population's coping capacity.

Need for Prudent Planning

4. (SBU) That said, the GOZ's foreign exchange levels are at the lowest level since independence, therefore so is its ability to import food. In addition, the economy is considerably shrunk from 2002-2003 and it is not at all clear that the coping mechanism's the population has been using will continue to function in this crisis. Widespread food insecurity therefore seems likely.

5. (SBU) For 2005, assuming a 600,000 MTs maize crop, a GOZ ability to import up to 600,000 MTs more and insignificant carry over stock, against a demand for 1.6 million MTs, we estimate a maize deficit of 400,000 MTs, of which 200,000 MTs is for livestock and seed. This calculation gives a best case critical human food deficit of approximately 200,000 MTs.

6. (SBU) It is unclear as yet whether the GOZ will issue an appeal. WFP informally told us (protect source) that the planning figure for an appeal should one be called is 200,000 MTs. Based on our discussions with WFP and C-SAFE, we plan to monitor the situation closely and recommend that the USG be prepared to respond quickly if a crisis begins to develop or the GOZ makes an appeal. In the interval, with Washington approval, we recommend an approach to the GOZ to approve vulnerable group feeding for a limited number of those most at risk and to expand school feeding to encompass take-home rations.

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